

Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, Luke Pollard MP, Keynote Speech at DPRTE 2026

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The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, Luke Pollard MP, opened the two-day DPRTE 2026 conference with a keynote speech addressing topics such as procurement, innovation and skills.

Thanks Jacqueline and good morning everyone.

Very good to see you all here today and a very good welcome to DPRTE 2026. A chance for the defence procurement industry to come together, a chance for us to forge new bonds, and to move us all to warfighting Readiness.

Because as a government, it is our stated ambition to get our armed forces towards warfighting readiness. Able to deter, and, if necessary, defeat a peer adversary.

The brave men and women of our Armed Forces can't do that without the work that you do. So thank you for the work that you are doing.

And you all have seen that this very moment, we have Typhoons and F-35s in the air above the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Their work in keeping British citizens, British bases and British allies safe is critical to our national security but also to our deep industrial partnerships that we have with our friends in that region.

You can't fly a Typhoon without the parts, the services, the ingenuity, the investment, and the innovation that you provide for our armed forces. So, thank you for what you are doing.

Now, you will have seen that since Iran started indiscriminately attacking its neighbours after the U.S and Israeli strikes, that there has been more focus on how we can deliver air defences, and other counter UAS systems, faster to our friends and to our forces. I'm afraid, I'm an impatient Janna. So, I'm from Plymouth. I want things to happen faster. And you can see just as the general public can see that the world is getting more dangerous. Is getting more unpredictable. The threats that we are facing are becoming more severe and more apparent to us all.

But that means we have to increase defence spending. Precisely, what we are doing. Five billion pounds extra in the defence budget this year alone. And we have to increase defence spending faster. That's what the Prime Minister told the Munich security conference a few weeks ago. But it's not just about the amount of money that we spend on defence. It's how we spend it. So, I'm really excited that shortly you'll hear from Rupert Pierce, our new National Armaments Director about how we're changing procurement. How we're delivering capabilities faster. How we're cutting the time of contracting. How we're removing stupid rules that get in the way of delivering the capabilities that our Forces need at a faster pace.

And as we're spending more of an increasing defence budget with UK-based firms, we're also spending more of that with SMEs as well. With a stated of ambition to increase our SMEs spend by 50% of direct spend between the Ministry of Defence and small businesses by May 2028. Now we could not be doing this work without your workforce and your ingenuity.

The Typhoons, we're flying are only flying because of the work that's done in Lancashire. The welders, the engineers of radar weapons and engines in Bolton, Bristol, Luton and Edinburgh. Nor without the safety engineers, the testers the auditors and the pilots from across all of our home Nations. And it's a tiny snapshot of how to deliver warfighting readiness, we need a whole team approach, not just the men and women of our armed forces, but those in our industry as well. If you take Typhoon alone, that helps employ more than 20, 000 people across the UK across 330 UK firms. A similar number is employed in the F-35 supply chain across more than 100 tier one suppliers.

And when you look beyond those two aircraft, to other capabilities that we have in the region in the Middle East, at the moment, like our anti-drone teams armed with lightweight multi-role missiles made in Belfast. Our Wildcat helicopters made in Somerset. HMS Dragon built on the Clyde. And when you add in all those capabilities additional platforms, you can see that this approach to warfighting readiness is a team sport.

Now, our capabilities beyond the Middle East require that same approach as well. The Carrier Strike Group, that is preparing to deploy to the North Atlantic and the High North all delivered maintained and upgraded by an army of procurement experts across the national armaments directors group, and wider defence all represented here at this conference.

You begin to build a picture of the scale of a sector, and the opportunity to reinforce that defence is an engine for growth. It's an opportunity to tell the story. Now, if I'm speaking honestly, in the past, defence has not always been good at telling the story about how working for a defence company big or small is a good career.

We've sometimes hidden behind our barbed wire fences and our walls. Not wanting to tell the full story. Now in asking you to tell the story of what you do. I do not want you telling the secret squirrel part of the tech that you make. I don't want you just revealing the terminal velocity of missiles but I do want you saying that your sector, your company is a great place for people to work. A great place for young people to start a career, a great place for people to be retrained mid-career. Because if we can make the case that defence is an engine for growth, which has the advantage of not just being a good sound bite, has the advantage of being true as well. Then we attract more investment, more bright young people wanting to start their career in this sector. More people looking to invest in the services and capabilities that you provide. Now look to do that, I realise there's jobs that I have to do as a minister. One of those is we have to publish the Defence Investment Plan.

There's very few people that want to out more than I do, believe me and that will come out soon and we're working flat out to deliver that. But while acknowledging that that certainty that comes from a pipeline of 10 years of seeing which capabilities we're investing, many of you will already know those because you will have read it in the Strategic Defence Review.

The DIP just implements the SDR. But we haven't waited for the DIP to sign the contracts that we need. Since the general election over 1200 contracts signed, 86 percent of those going to British companies. But we've got a lot of work to do to make sure it's delivered, right? Now, 18 months ago when I was made a minister in the MOD, 47 of our 49 major defence programs were both delayed and they were over budget.

A third of our equipment program was unfunded. That's the inheritance that we have to sort out because I want to make sure that Defence Investment Plan is fully funded is clear about the promises we're making about the capabilities, the areas that we're asking people to invest in, and you can see those already.

Big bets on autonomy, both in the maritime and air domains. More investment in AI and speeding up productivity and battlemaking decisions. It's also why we're investing in six new energetics

factories, and where that to deliver some of the capabilities we need, we need to look at those crush areas where we can support the supply chain. Energetics being a really good example but not the only one.

And that is precisely, why when it comes to the work that you are doing here and the work that I kicked off at our last DPRTE conference in Manchester at the end of October, I said that we would Backing British and we are, I said that we will be looking at investing in more British companies, and we are, and we said we've been bringing forward more procurements and more Innovative procurements and we have.

So you can look at things like the new autonomous naval procurements that Royal Navy has put out. A range of new naval drone capabilities, and releasing the competition for project Nightfall to co-develop ballistic missiles for Ukraine. That demonstrates a new urgency that we have injected into defence procurement.

And in just over two months, thanks to our commercial X team, we've gone from launching a 20 million pound fund to find the next defence unicorns, to signing contracts with some of those most promising British candidates. But we're not just investing in the future of warfare. We're also investing in our national security now, and that means back in the UK workers and UK innovators.

And that's why at our last time we came together, we launched our consultation on the new offset regime, building links between our industry between UK firms And those nations abroad, where we work by kit from. Injecting additional capability and connections. Since I spoke to you in October, we've signed defence contracts worth £4.9 billion pounds and 94% of those have gone to British companies.

That is a sign that procurement is still happening and we're favouring British companies, as we said we would do. That includes 650 million pounds for the Typhoon upgrade program that secures 1500 jobs. A billion pounds for the New Medium Helicopter Built in Yeovil, securing 3300 jobs in Somerset. And we've spent millions of pounds on drone procurements. Earlier this month, an order for 20 uncrewed surface vessels built by Kraken in Hampshire, taking us a step closer to delivering our vision of a Hybrid Navy.

And today, to keep and maintain our diverse fleet of small military vessels at sea. I can announce that we are awarding our in-service contracts worth more than 280 million pounds over seven years to Babcock and Serco. to deliver our commitments back SMEs almost 200 million of that. Contract will go to Golden Arrow Marine who operate across the South Coast and to UK Docks based in Tees and Southampton firm Griffin Marine support. Nine separate contracts that will keep around 3000 military boats, at sea across a hundred different classes. From small ribs used to counter narcotics and the drug trade to our Royal Navy p2000s Patrol vessels that play in important role in escorting of Vanguard-class submarines.

Now alongside these new defence contracts, I said that we'd be implementing reforms in the way that we procure, and we're laying the foundations for that. The National Armaments Director will set out shortly the blueprint for much of that procurement reform that we want to set in train.

But I want it to be faster. I want it to be more efficient. I want it to favour and support British-based firms. I want there to be more investment in skills as part of that. Unapologetically, more investment in skills to deliver those. Which is why shortly, we'll be announcing the results of the search for the new Defence Technical Excellence. Colleges. Why we're investing more in the growth deals up and down the country. And why since October, we've stood up the Defence Office for Small Business Growth, a new one-stop shop for SMEs to better access defence. Because I think it's fair to say looking around the room at the SMEs that I recognise, it has not always been easy for SMEs to

access defence.

Not always easy to understand, which is the door to go in to access the contract that, you know you can deliver and deliver well. That's what the Defence Office for Small Business Growth is designed to help with and it's standing up over the course of this year. But today I'd like to go further and I'm proud to announce the launch of the first cohort of the AWS UK SME Vanguard program. A new MOD initiative in partnership with Amazon Web Solutions, and Make UK Defence to modernise and transform the manufacturing industrial capabilities with the UK's SME Community. Today, five UK SMEs are being awarded a one-million-dollar total in Amazon web services, cloud computing, credits to digitise their service and accelerate the development of Defence Solutions.

Also going further by opening a business centre in Kyiv. Some of you will have been on the trade missions that I have led to Ukraine. Having trade missions has been a good start, but having an all year-round UK business presence in Kyiv to help you access support, to sell your products to our close ally fighting against Russian aggression will be stood up shortly. The new business centre there with announcements made shortly.

And the growth deals that we announced in the Defence Industrial Strategy are being delivered. We've announced the ones in Wales and Scotland, and South Yorkshire. Plymouth and Northern Ireland will follow very shortly. Each of them, taking 50 million pounds to invest in skills and Innovation.

And since I spoke at the last DPRTE conference, I'm afraid the world has only got more dangerous. More people in our communities are feeling the effects of that. Driving up energy prices, driving uncertainty, and people feeling less secure about the international scene than they were. To respond to that we're increasing defence funding.

We're re-arming and backing our armed forces. But this is a team sport. It requires not only ministers like me, the National Armaments Director Rupert and the MOD team to deliver faster, to remove barriers and obstacles to growth. But it requires you to invest, to continue innovating to deliver services faster more digitally enabled. And supporting the growth and not only our own Armed Forces, but those who are allies as well. In these more uncertain times, it is us all working together that's delivering that war-waiting Readiness. And when our planes are in the sky, when drones are being shot out of the air by our forces using the technology that you make, you know, what you do, makes a difference, thank you for what you are doing.

Please keep going. Thank you very much.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-for-defence-readiness-and-industry-luke-pollard-mp-keynote-speech-at-dprte-2026>